

describes, and by giving our voices to the culture we live in through the gospel we have experienced and which we proclaim, we will contribute to God's world that requires renewal. That is why I recommend this book – because it directs us to the Book through which we discover how to think and act in God's way in a world that only has its way.

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The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary

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Commentaries are a rather interesting genre of writing. Their whole purpose is to follow the arguments and ideas of *another* book, usually a book from antiquity that is culturally and chronologically distant to modern readers, to explain it, and in some sense update it for contemporary readers. For Christian readers, and especially pastors, teachers, and scholars, biblical commentaries are a staple on the bookshelf, attesting to the primary importance of scripture. And yet, there are different kinds of commentaries or sub-genres of biblical commentary, and certainly different ways of using commentaries (for teaching and preaching, spiritual discipline, devotional reading), a point I will return to at the conclusion. While the genre distinctions are not always clear cut and there is plenty of overlap, there are nevertheless important distinctions. There are historical-critical and exegetical commentaries that are sometimes quite technical and aimed at the scholar; other commentaries that are still primarily exegetical but briefer and less technical than those of the above category so they can be more accessible and used by a wider audience; pastoral or “application” commentaries or something similar, which put added emphasis on the relevance and use of the biblical text for the contemporary world and in church communities, and devotional commentaries that are penned for the general laity. Commentaries may be further categorized along confessional lines or particular theological traditions.¹

A newer movement in commentary writing (though reflecting a much older movement) is the “theological commentary” on the biblical text, which is the sub-genre within which falls the commentary under the current review. For the uninitiated, this may seem redundant. Aren't all biblical commentaries by necessity

1 These distinctions can be seen on the helpful website bestcommentaries.com, which lists and ranks commentaries for each biblical book, and tags each commentary as “pastoral,” “technical,” or “devotional.” Other tags indicate the theological confession or approach of the writer. Most commentaries are given multiple tags demonstrating much the usual overlap.

“theological?” Well, yes and no. In the current world of scholarship “theological commentary” is distinguished from especially critical-exegetical commentaries in two basic ways. First, critical and exegetical commentaries put their primary focus on understanding the text historically, paying special attention to the grammar and syntax in the primary language, the historical context, and the circumstances and background of the composition itself. Theological commentaries, on the other hand, put their primary focus on the theology that emerges from the final form of the text without being encumbered with the finer details of historical and textual analysis. Of course, that does not mean that many exegetical commentaries are not also “theological,” nor does it mean that theological commentaries ignore the historical context or historical-critical issues. It is rather a matter of emphasis.² The second area of distinction is that most commentaries in the “theological commentary” sub-genre are written by systematic, dogmatic, or constructive theologians rather than biblical scholars.

David Ford is just such a theologian, accomplished in his field, who has also spent twenty years immersed in the Gospel of John for the writing of this commentary (p. 433).³ The initial questions that a theologian may bring to their interpretation of the biblical text may be quite different from the initial questions of the biblical scholar. Indeed, Ford’s initial questions “why John?” and “why now?” demonstrate his concern for the contemporary relevance of the work. These questions are put forth in Ford’s introduction, which might be better called an “invitation,” where he seeks to draw the reader, “the single, beloved reader” into an encounter with the Gospel, where it is Jesus who asks ‘what are you [plural] looking for? (1:38)’ (p. 24). This “invitation” immediately prepares the reader for the type of commentary they are about to read. Ford has not written his commentary as a resource for information gathering or a place to get answers on a particular verse but rather attempts to draw the reader to the text, to hear John’s voice and ultimately encounter Jesus through John’s presentation. While the primary audience for Ford is the Christian reader, he sees it not merely as a book for Christians, but also for the world, because that is how he understands the multifaceted and profound purpose of John’s Gospel itself.

- 2 Theological commentaries have arisen out of the fairly recent renewal movement of “theological interpretation” or “theological hermeneutics,” a practice that attempts to recover an approach to interpretation that is not beholden to modern historical-critical methods, but rather seeks to recover a fresh theological approach to the text reflecting pre-critical practice where the main scripture interpreters were pastor-theologians. But contemporary theological interpretation does not disavow the findings of historical-critical scholarship, but judiciously makes use of it while seeking to interpret the text theologically, as the biblical text was originally meant to be read.
- 3 Ford surveys his works of theology in the epilogue of the commentary.

The format of the commentary is well-conceived and very manageable for the reader. Ford does not concern himself with the structure of the Gospel, but the commentary itself is structured along the established chapter divisions of the biblical text. The layout of each chapter is very consistent. The chapters begin with a few pages of introduction to summarize and set forth the main themes. Then, rather than using the typical verse-by-verse approach for comment, Ford lays out several verses within distinguishable paragraphs or sections of the text of the Gospel before commenting on each section. This is repeated for each chapter. Another formatting feature of the commentary is the inclusion of extended “side-bar” quotations outside of the flow of the main text. Here, Ford includes a wide variety of authors who have especially influenced his thinking on the subject matter, ranging from other commentators and theological writers to poets and other thinkers whom the Gospel of John has impacted. This feature allows the author to include material that otherwise would be impossible to fit into the main text and to widen the creative scope of interaction with the Gospel of John. However, the format allows readers to choose whether to read these extra quotations or skip them altogether without affecting their understanding of the author’s main discussion. An additional formatting feature is the quite frequent use of bold and italic type. Italicized text is used for the author’s points of emphasis. While this might help readers note important points, in my view italics are a bit overused, with italicized type sometimes incorporating several consecutive sentences and thus lessening the impact on the reader. Bold type is employed within the commentary sections to highlight the individual verses of the particular section being treated. On the positive side, this makes it easy to scan the chapter looking for comments on a particular verse, but on the other hand, the lack of verse numbers in the emboldened type makes it more challenging to locate the corresponding text in one’s own Bible.

However, avoiding the verse-by-verse structure allows Ford’s prose to flow more smoothly throughout without being disrupted too often by breaks in the text. This allows for a more pleasurable read and is perhaps one characteristic and advantage of writing a “theological” commentary. Whereas a critical commentary will take paragraphs or pages to deliberate on one exegetical issue, Ford generally avoids these prolonged discussions. The author is aware of exegetical and historical-critical issues,⁴ and as the commentary shows, has interacted with much of the secondary literature, but the sub-genre allows him for the most part to state his exegetical position and deliberate on the theological ramifications. On select issues Ford does note various interpretive options and, in these cases, he recognizes the validity of other opinions but does not delve into complex arguments to prove his position. Perhaps the best example of this is the question of whether

4 On historical criticism he states his aim to be “sure footed” (p. 13 fn. 6).

John knew and used the synoptic Gospels. While biblical scholarship is divided on this question, Ford states his view that John indeed knew and read the synoptic Gospels without providing a detailed argument for why he takes this position. However, this view certainly impacts how Ford views and explains many of the Johannine distinctives throughout the commentary. Alternatively, Ford is also happy in places to state alternative views on an issue without taking a hard and fast position himself, for example on John's placement of the temple cleansing, or the translation of John 20:24b, where Ford mentions a "minority translation" and leaves it for the reader to decide, simply stating that "there is wisdom in both lines of interpretation" (p. 408). It is refreshing that a commentator need not take a firm position on every issue, though Ford certainly does not overuse this tactic.

Indeed, in certain cases, Ford takes bold exegetical stands. Perhaps the one that will be most surprising or challenging to readers is his decision to follow Chrys Caragounis's translation of the key terms in John 15:1-8 (pp. 291-292). Caragounis argued in 2012 that the Greek term ἄμπελος (*ampelos*), traditionally translated as "vine," had come, by the late first century, to refer to the entire vineyard, while the term κλήμα (*klēma*), commonly translated "branch," came to mean the entire vine by the time of John's writing.⁵ Thus Ford concludes based on this recent research, that the "better translation" of John 15:5 is "I am the vineyard and you are the vines." Ford goes on to argue how this translation is a better fit contextually for the whole passage and how the OT imagery uses both "vine" and "vineyard" for Israel. Ford later considers that perhaps the author of the Gospel himself was aware of the linguistic development and left his language "deliberately ambiguous, able to generate fresh interpretations according to different intertexts and contexts" (p. 292). Ford is frequently sanguine about the possibility of such deliberate ambiguity and Johannine "double meanings."

Accordingly, Ford's hermeneutical approach is to read John's text in what he calls the "deep plain sense," which "invites the reader to search for "deeper meanings in plain words." Clearly, the nature of John's Gospel seems quite open to such "deeper meanings," including what Ford calls in John 1:1 John's "improvisation" of the "intertext of Genesis 1:1. Ford also suggests that "*John's way of reading is a model for ours*" (p. 27; italics original) so that the reader has the freedom to also "improvise" on the Johannine text (pp. 27-28). While I recognize the value of Ford's suggestion that John is teaching his readers how to read his text through the text itself, I do find it problematic to use the same term "improvisation" to describe what John does with OT texts and what the reader does with John's texts.

5 Caragounis's article cited by Ford is "Abide in Me": The New Mode of Relationship between Jesus and His Followers as a Basis for Christian Ethics (John 15), in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: Implicit Ethics in the Johannine Writings*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik 3; WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 250-263.

Indeed, Ford agrees with a growing movement in biblical scholarship that recognizes that John thought of himself as writing scripture (p. 2)⁶ and that John's writing is a testimony to God's "unique act of self-revelation in history" (p. 29). I found his discussion on testimony in the context of the incarnation to be profitable: "*History cannot be rerun, it is one-off, and so its primary form of truth is testimony*" (p. 36; italics original). So, if John at least thinks he is writing inspired scripture based on testimony in continuity with the OT scriptures but improvised based on the leading of the Spirit in light of the unique revelation of Jesus, there needs to be a stronger distinction between what John is doing with the OT and what subsequent readers might do with John's Gospel.

Throughout, Ford is adept at pointing readers to valuable "intertexts" either from the Old Testament or from the Synoptic Gospels to aid their reading specific sections of John without entangling his prose with a profusion of biblical references and possible background texts. In addition, he will on occasion helpfully recommend a re-reading of a previous passage from John to understand a later passage. This is for Ford especially crucial concerning John's prologue, which he points back to often as a guide for understanding later Johannine passages.

Despite writing work with a largely positive and inspiring outlook, Ford does not avoid taking on difficult issues. He sensitively but rightly rejects charges against John's Gospel as being anti-Semitic, reminding readers of the Gospel's frame of reference, namely that the language of hostility and conflict is the "language of family quarreling between Jews and later between Jews and Jewish Christians" (p. 185). Any later anti-Semitic uses of the Gospel are to be fully rejected and have no place within Christian theology. Needing some further clarification in my view is the discussion regarding "supersessionism" or "replacement theology" (pp. 78–81). The concern to distance John and his theology from interpretations that helped lead to "contempt for and persecution of Jews" is surely valid. However, there could have been more precision in defining such theologies and how they are different from a Christian biblical theology of fulfilment that is drawn exegetically from the text, where Jesus is presented as the true fulfilment of the trajectory of promise initiated and rooted in Israel and the OT scriptures. Ford states that "there can be no avoiding Christian distinctiveness of this grace" regarding the person of Jesus in John 1:17, but that "neither should there be any denial by Christians of the other grace, 'given through Moses,' which is a gift of God, cosmic in scope, and of continuing importance to both Jews and Christians" (p. 81). Yet more could be said as to how these two "graces" are related in John's Gospel, which

6 On John's presentation of his Gospel as scripture, see my earlier article in *Kairos*: Gregory S. Thellman, Four Stages of Revelation: The Uniting of Scripture, Jesus' Word and Spirit- Illumined Remembrance in the Fourth Gospel, *Kairos : Evangelical Journal of Theology* 11:2 (2017): 197–215.

makes explicit and exclusive claims about the need for belief in Jesus for the reception of life as Ford's discussion of John 14:6 acknowledges.

Another theological subject in John that is challenging and not unrelated to the above is that of judgment for those who reject Jesus as Messiah. While in some places Ford might be thought to tactfully sidestep the issue, in general, he recognizes the reality of rejection and ultimately judgment, grounded on the insight that authentic belief is necessary "if a relationship of love is to be mutual" (p. 99). As such, Ford stresses more the open invitation and the responsibility of the reader for personal decisions. Various readers may contest and counter certain theological assertions by Ford in this area, but these objections would lie squarely in the area of speculative theology, rather than exegetically from the text of John. I agree with Ford that the rhetorical purpose of judgment language is spurred not by the theological reflection of the mysteries of the mind of God and his determined judgment, but rather by a full-fledged desire that readers repent from their rejection of Jesus and turn toward him in repentance and faith to receive life. After all, that is John's stated purpose.

The greatest strength of this commentary is Ford's ability to nimbly and semi-poetically lead readers to that close encounter with John and to unveil for them the great themes and narrative arcs of the Gospel. Ford's writing is creative and picturesque, often describing, for example, meaning in the text as coming in successive "waves." It is also instructive and insightful, as he intriguingly describes John's Gospel as "an examination and education of human desire" (p. 10). For Ford, the overarching questions for John are the question "who is Jesus?" and "what is essential for those who follow him?" (p. 434). The single word that more than any other defines John's Gospel for Ford is that of "abundance," and that word is most powerfully applied to the Johannine emphases on "life" and "love," particularly in Jesus' relationship to his Father and in his relationship to his disciples, who are offered to share in the life and love of the triune God. That is why, in a sense, Ford goes beyond the "commentary" genre in his inclusion of musical lyrics and poetry that are connected with John's Gospel. There is a beauty in the Gospel as it is read and re-read that stimulates such responses, and theology is truly practiced as these re-readings are pondered and actively lived out over and over again in communities of faith.

How should a student of scripture make use of Ford's commentary on John? As a biblical scholar, I am supportive and enthusiastic about the growing sub-genre of "theological commentary" and Ford's is an excellent exemplar of the genre. As such, I recommend using Ford's commentary alongside and in discussion with other more exegetically oriented commentaries to preach and teach through the Gospel. It should also prove a valuable guide for theological and missiological exploration of John's Gospel, in particular in John's role in the formation of important Christian doctrine and its universal scope that points toward world mission.

Finally, Ford will make a skilled and encouraging theological companion for any believer in an intensive reading or daily devotional reading through the Gospel of John, written so that its readers may believe, or continue to believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing...have life in his name” (John 20:31 ESV).

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